

GUESTS
OF
THE HEART

BY
PEGGY WEBLING

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To Marion, with love from
Peggy Webling.

Xmas. 1917.

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GUESTS OF THE HEART

PENNY WERLING

BY PLAYMATE

PEN AND INK DRAWING

BY

DOROTHY CHILCOTT.

THE
OF
THE

GUESTS OF THE HEART

BY

PEGGY WEBLING

I.

MY PLAYMATE.

MY first playmate must have been a fairy. Grown up people could not see her. I think she slept under my pillow, for I distinctly remember lifting up the corner every morning, when I awoke, to see if she were safe.

I did not often talk about her, for none of my friends cared to listen, or they said, "Yes, darling!" without paying any attention, or they smiled at one another—looking as idiotic as only grown-up people can—and exclaimed, "What a fancy that child has!"

The words were puzzling. I knew when I had had a present, or a cold, but I did not know what it meant to have a fancy. I should like to have seen it, especially when they told one another it was bright or quaint.

My playmate, who slept under the pillow, was always changing. At first she was exactly like the picture of a fairy in "Children's Album." Did you have a book called "Children's Album" when you were little? There was a picture on each page, and facing it a short, impressive story in one or two-syllable words printed in big type. Most of the pictures were very well known to grown-up people, but

the clever gentleman who had written "Children's Album" did not take any notice of that. He simply used them in his own way to point the moral and adorn the tale.

It was interesting, when my playmate and I were big enough to be taken for the first time to a real picture gallery, to find many of these same pictures, under other names, hanging on the walls. It increased our admiration for the clever gentleman who had invented the stories and made drawings in "Children's Album" before they hung these strange, old-fashioned copies—as we thought them—in the National Gallery.

My playmate went with me everywhere. Her eyes were bright blue—exactly the eyes of my first wax doll. My playmate was my first wax doll. No! She was my old doll that we children at home called a "knockabout," because she could not be broken. Then she turned herself into an impossible wooden horse, with a black tuft for a mane and a cylinder-shaped body, covered with black spots. I drove this horse continually, groomed it, fed it, and talked to it.

My playmate appeared in the shape of many toys, but a day came when she changed into something very different.

We were taken into the country, my sisters and I. We went to Hayes, in Kent. My playmate turned Hayes Common into a wide plain, vast, limitless; the stubble fields waved with prairie grasses; the buttercups brimmed over with magic dew; I could hear the melody that harebells ring.

My playmate grew shy of company, but directly I was alone she came to me. We found a little dingle of our own, where the sunshine dripped, like amber rain, through tangled branches; the air was filled with murmuring sound; delicate fronds and half-hidden flowers whispered the secrets my playmate knew.

I saw, through her eyes, the revels of the fairies, while the scattered leaves turned into brown elves and puk-wudges, and Queen Mab sailed past, throned on the wings of a tawny butterfly.

The hours crept on. We were still in the dingle, but the amber rain ceased to fall. Vivid patches of emerald on the grass faded into sombre hue. The flowers went to sleep. We looked up through the branches of the trees, suddenly

grown so tall that they seemed to touch the sky, and we saw the moon and stars shimmering through the slowly drifting clouds.

I trembled, responsive to the unheard music of the night. My playmate was no longer by my side, but lost in mystery—the child of the night—weaver of dreams—spirit of joy.

My mother told me, the next morning, that I had lost myself in the dingle and my father had carried me home, fast asleep, in his arms. They were wrong. I had really *found* myself in the dingle.

That wondrous place called Hayes Common disappeared from the world at the end of the Summer holidays. We never returned.

My playmate grew with my growth. She had me back to the days of chivalry. She taught me to love pictures, and showed me the consolation and endless delight of poetry.

I used to talk about my playmate sometimes, when I was a little girl, but very few people understood me even then. She became more shy and elusive as childhood faded behind me like a land of long ago.

At times she has often fled from me altogether. I have longed, in vain, to see her, yearned to feel her touch on my heart. Then, in my desolation, she has suddenly returned—leapt out of the pages as I open a book, hidden herself in a garden, danced across the stage at a theatre, looked at me gaily or pensively, out of the eyes of a stranger or a friend.

Sometimes her beauty is the beauty of dawn, pearly and indefinite; at others, she blooms like a burning rose of June.

Is it she who has peopled Hades with its legions of darkness? Is it she who has filled Paradise with angels? Enough for me that her exquisite touch makes the world fair. Without her I am sad, and old, and weary.

Her name is Imagination.

II.

THE WEeping WOMAN.

I WAS alone in the house at night.

The wind sighed and moaned in the stripped plane-trees that shaded our gloomy street. The fire burnt low, and the room looked vast in its black shadows.

I was alone with my lonely thoughts. Old memories swept over me.

There was a low, reluctant knocking at the door. I feigned to be unconscious of the sound, for I knew who was the guest waiting on the threshold.

The Past took form and changed my quiet room. I saw myself in many scenes. A slow procession of Wasted Hours trailed across the hearth. Lost Opportunities crept out of the shadows, half hidden in the darkness and futility of self-reproach.

The door opened slowly—slowly—noiselessly. A woman stood on the threshold. She was wrapped in sombre garments from head to foot. One hand was clasped over her eyes, the other hung limply at her side.

The door closed of itself behind her as she drew near to the hearth. Her face was drenched with tears, looking out of the dark clouds of her hair like the wan moon, half seen, at the end of a storm.

She had come to me unwillingly, and her steps dragged upon the floor. She wept without ceasing.

The lamp began to burn low. The flames in the fire sank into a fading hollow. The howling of the wind changed into a dull, insistent moaning. The rain lashed against the window panes.

The Weeping Woman crouched upon the hearth ; so sad, so abject a figure in her humble, wordless misery that her forehead touched the dead ashes and her sombre hair shadowed her form like a heavy cloak.

Drearily, wearily, the night-hours passed.

She lifted her head, after a long time, and clasped her hands in silent prayer. The tears still trickled down her face and weighted her dark eyelids.

It was shudderingly cold.

A long pageant of the years of my life drifted by, as if the walls of the house were gone, showing a vast plain beyond, where ghosts of the Past trooped out of the forest of gaunt trees against the sky.

The Weeping Woman pointed to the phantoms of half-forgotten sorrows that took form in blurred outline—blurred by her tears—; to the secret, cruel winged words that flew overhead, like bats, blindly; to the thoughts of deadening hate, or hot anger, that crawled along the black earth.

There was the sound of hopeless voices, mingled in a long wailing of despair.

The Weeping Woman hung round my neck, with her slowly beating heart against my own. All my strength ebbed and flowed away. My senses grew faint. My spirit was drowning—drowning—in her tears.

When morning broke I was alone. Remorse had knelt upon my hearth all night.

III.

A FRIEND INFALLIBLE.

IF I judge a certain old friend of mine by the company he keeps—well, I am frankly puzzled.

He is so catholic in his tastes. One meets him everywhere, but in many disguises. At times he is broad and hearty and rough ; at times he is delicate and dainty ; at times he is sly and holds his tongue in his cheek ; at times he makes the rafters ring, or fills the open air with his peals of mirth ; at times his voice is as soft as a whisper of love.

Whimsical and capricious, he can be very melancholy and moody, as the fancy takes him. He is absolutely free. He refuses to be held captive by any man or woman. He is more fond of the society of men, by the way, than of women, but he makes many exceptions to this rule.

Laws do not bind him. He knows no conventions. He is rather shy of drawing-rooms, and very shy of bores. He understands Equality. He heard the chimes at midnight with Master Shallow and Sir John.

This old friend of mine is a wonderful traveller. Is there any part of the globe he has not seen ? Is there any city he has not helped to build ? Is there any human experience he has not known ?

We do not see him when our eyes are blinded with tears, or darkened with sorrows too great for tears. But he is never more truly seen and appreciated than when he touches hands with his half-brother, Pathos.

His name is Humour.

I have met him in the company of crook-backed, short-sighted Malice. Laughter, holding both his sides, is usually at his heels, as close as a shadow.

The most learned Judge is a narrow-minded pedant without him. The greatest scholar is a fool if he has never met him.

We cannot get on in life without Humour—genial, generous, wise Humour ! He is infinitely greater and dearer

to our hearts than his flashing comrade, nimble Wit. He is warm and beneficent, like the gracious sunshine ; he is wide and deep, like a tranquil lake. He is joyous. He is tolerant and tender. He keeps us sane and makes us sanguine. He is our Friend Infallible.

You rob us of our youth, old Father Time ! You gather our lost illusions into your ruthless hoids, trample our hopes in the dust, snatch away our ambition, change our loves—but leave us our Sense of Humour and we defy you.

IV.

THE YELLOW FIEND.

TRAY and I met the little demon at the same time. Tray was a puppy. I was a small child.

A baby and a white kitten appeared at our house on the same day, or within a few days of each other. I did not approve of the baby. A senseless, silly, bald-headed baby! Tray took exception to the kitten. A fluffy, huffy, foolish, frolicsome kitten!

Somebody said—a ridiculous person about a hundred years old, with a long face like an old sheep, who lived next door—that the baby put my nose out of joint. My nose was perfectly straight. She made the same remark about Tray, but his nose was also unchanged, for I felt it with my finger. It was cold and wet, the same as usual.

The little yellow fiend wanted to play with us both. He was very slight and shadowy, like a streak of firelight, or feeble sunshine, darting about the room.

He found it very hard to make friends with Tray, who looked at him askance, every shaggy hair bristling and his honest, doggy eyes brimful of suspicion. The little fiend incited Tray to snap at the kitten. He made him sulky—our good, cheerful Tray, who had never sulked before—when the kitten was petted.

Then the little fiend turned his attention to me. He whispered to me to dislike my baby brother. He pointed to all the thoughtless, cruel, grown-up people admiring him. He told me I was forgotten. He said that nobody cared for me any longer, and I had better go away for ever.

I experienced—perhaps for half a day at a time, perhaps for a few minutes—the utter desolation of childhood.

The hard grey eye of our neighbour did not perceive it, or the nurse who fulsomely praised the blinking, gasping baby, or my father, or my elder sisters. But my mother, on a day

when the little yellow demon had provoked me almost beyond endurance, suddenly saw him as plainly as I did.

She drew me to her side, pressed her cheek against my own and whispered how dearly she loved me, she loved me, she loved me! I can feel her arm now as it clung round me, and the caress of her beautiful hand. I can see her beautiful face bending over me.

Then she lifted the baby out of his little bed, made me sit down on a stool and hold him in my arms. The nurse and my sisters—and the oyster-eyed neighbour—had never allowed me to touch him. My mother took the baby's tiny fist and rubbed it against my cheek and cooed over us both, long and softly.

I forgot the Yellow Fiend. He had shrivelled up, like a piece of coloured paper thrown into the fire, and disappeared in a puff of smoke.

* * * * *

When we met again, in my school-days, Jealousy had grown cunning. He was no longer a tricky sprite of yellow ochre.

Rosabel, my chosen friend, was a serious girl, with dark, lustrous eyes. She wrote poetry and short religious meditations that were to be published, after her death, under the title of "The Perfect Theologist."

Rosabel was faithful, but cold; sincere, but without humour; beautiful, but indifferent to beauty. I loved this girl with the intensity and self-abandonment of an idealist. If the Yellow Fiend had only let us alone! Rosabel was too good to notice him. He rarely interferes, I believe, with perfect "theologists," but he haunted and tormented me.

The Yellow Fiend is the most insidious and cruel of all the guests of the heart.

He has a jaundiced eye that magnifies trifles and probes into motives. No door can bar him out. He sits upon our pillow at night, banishing rest:

"Nor poppy, nor mandragora,
Nor all the drowsy syrups of the world,
Shall ever medicine thee to that sweet sleep
Which thou ow'dst yesterday."

Dull suspicion is his constant friend, and base thoughts cling to him. He is foolish and cunning, shallow and shrewd, violent and secret. The knife he thrusts into his victim's palm is double-edged. It wounds the hand that clutches it.

The Yellow Fiend is a futile fiend. He has never recalled love that has flown. He has never stirred the dying embers of a burnt-out fire into new life. It is his curse—how often!—to be the very cause of the inconstancy he dreads.

The Yellow Fiend is a timid spectre, starting from shadows, listening at doors, opening letters.

He is a raging spectre, prone to hysteria in women and madness in men. He is, at the same time, sly and subtle, for he often makes us cherish him in ignorance.

We see a new fault in an old friend—Jealousy has pointed it out. We are unjust to our Well-beloved—it is Jealousy that prompts us. We cannot understand our rival's success—it is Jealousy that dulls our admiration.

Hate and Envy are his henchmen. He is without love, but he is the distorted reflection of love. A paradox!

He is a ghost we can lay with Trust and Confidence. But now and again, to do him justice, he tells us the bitter truth.

Banish the Yellow Fiend! Fly from him! He is merciless. His touch withers beauty, confuses thought, kills happiness.

Of all the implacable enemies of the heart—beware of Jealousy.

V.

A SPIRIT VEILED.

ONCE upon a time, long, long ago, a Spirit lost her way. She belonged to an aerial world, above, below, and around ours, but far beyond the clouds. She had fluttered to earth in a whirling snowstorm. She was white as snow herself, soft as snow, warm as snow when it protects the sleeping buds under the ground.

The earth looked strange to her. She stood on a mountain summit, where she had alighted, watching the sunrise. She swayed, like a flower, in the pure air.

This was a lovely star! She had often looked at our world, with the other stars, from her distant home.

She looked upward into the sky, exalted. She looked downward into the heavily-laden branches of the giant trees, amazed. Her hair floated round her, sparkling and glittering. The soft flakes rested on her snowy shoulders and covered her feet.

The sun rose higher and higher. She looked in vain for beings like herself floating in the air. Strange star! She was all alone. She tried to see the world she had left behind, but it was hidden in the pearly light.

Then she wandered away from the summit of the mountain. The rocks grew bare, as she descended, and long icicles hung in the branches. The sun was hidden and the wind howled.

The gentle Spirit only smiled, for her light feet were unharmed by the jagged rocks, and the blustering wind whirled round her like a warm garment.

She reached the base of the mountain before the day was far spent, for she could run as swiftly as a bird flutters over the ground.

A village of scattered houses lay before her. At first she did not dare to approach them, but in the evening she looked through the little windows, wondering at the firelight on the walls, and listening to the sounds within.

Sometimes a child, looking out of window into the growing darkness, saw her for a minute, like a wavering moonbeam, and called to the people in the room to hurry to the window, but she had gone before they could get there.

At last she came to a cottage where a cruel mother was beating her little boy. At such a dreadful sight the Spirit began to weep, for the first time in her existence. She felt cold and desolate, but as her tears fell the cruel mother, suddenly ashamed, stayed her hand and allowed the screaming child to drag himself away. He rushed to the door and out into the windy night.

The Spirit stooped down and he ran, blindly, right into her arms. She soothed his cries and laid her hands on his bursting heart, charming it into quietude. Then she led him, fearfully and reluctantly, back into the cottage. He clung to her, sobbing.

She spoke to the mother, who fell back in amazement, white and trembling, staring at her. Then the mother made the sign of the Cross upon her breast.

There were other children in the room, hiding, but as the Lost Spirit crossed the threshold they began to creep out—two from behind the rough wooden press, one from beneath the bed, one from the dark recess by the window. The whimpering of a tiny baby ceased. All eyes were turned upon the Spirit. The flames leapt up upon the hearth to greet her. A great bough of pine in a corner of the room bowed down before her. Even the old oil lamp glowed more brightly, spluttering a little in its excitement.

She gathered the children into her arms, and looked at the overworked mother with tender interest. Then she sat down on the wooden bench by the side of the hearth. Her long, pale hair rippled on the ground.

Presently the man came home. He kicked open the door, and his great dog—half wolf, half dog—sprang in, shaking the snow from his rough coat. He lowered his head at the stranger, and the man behind him, almost as savage and wild as the dog, looked at her in blank astonishment.

The wife was frightened, and the children huddled together like little animals.

Suddenly the man's face changed. An unusual smile

gleamed in his fierce eyes and parted his lips. At the same instant the dog, bounding forward, stretched himself across the hearth and laid his great head down upon the stranger's bare feet.

She sat at their board that night, and slept, with the children round her, in their cold, bare room.

The Lost Spirit rose at dawn. She found the hunter's knife and cut off her long hair ; then she returned to the sleeping children, and laid it over the little twisted limbs of one who was crippled. It clung together, soft and warm, like a quilt of spun silk.

She kissed the children, and pressed her lips to the foreheads of the man and his wife. They slept quietly after she had touched them, and dreamed of their youth.

Then she drew back the bolt, softly, opened the door and closed it behind her. The wolf-dog ran after her for a little way, bounding at her side, trying to lick her hand.

The Lost Spirit found a beggar's cloak at the edge of the road and wrapped it round her, also a pair of wooden shoes, too old even for the beggar's wear, but strong enough to protect her tender feet. The mountain rocks had not injured her, but the flinty high-road, made by man, made her very weary.

Every hour in this strange, new world strengthened her desire to stay. She could not forget the touch of the children's hands, or the half-awakened, dumb appeal for her help in the faces of the wild hunter and his care-worn wife.

For many days the gentle Spirit wandered through the villages at the foothills of the snowy mountain. She rarely lingered for more than a day and night at any of the cottages. Few doors were closed against her. To some she appeared as an intimate friend ; others seemed to remember her face ; others said she resembled the playmate of their childhood ; others, their dead mother ; others, the teacher at their old school.

When they asked her whither she came, the aerial Spirit did not tell them. She had no name, but they called her Compassion. A thin veil was often drawn across her face, for her beauty was rarely seen in all its silvery splendour.

These things happened long ago. Long, long ago ! She has grown accustomed to our old world. She has wandered

in green valleys and through mountain passes. She knows the streets of cities.

The veiled Spirit of Compassion is the most sacred of all the guests of the heart.

Her care is universal. She has loosened the bonds of slavery ; her appeal has sheathed the sword of vengeance ; her soft tears are more powerful than the mighty torrents of ruthless Nature ; she hears the moaning of the down-trodden and oppressed.

All living things are dear to her. She loves the long-suffering, patient animals, the helpless birds, the marvellous, myriad creations of the earth and air and sea.

Listen to her voice when it whispers in your ear. Cherish her in your soul. Her name was called Blesséd when the Beatitudes were spoken on the Mount.

VI.

THE BUGBEAR.

FEAR is a monstrous thing.

Fear is the coldest, most deadening guest of the human heart.

I met It first, thanks to our Nurse—our Nurse was a black-browed young person aged thirteen years, and guaranteed fond of children—when I was very young. It lived on the stairs at that time, just beyond the spot where the gaslight from the hall—we called it a hall, but rude people called it a passage—ended.

I cannot describe Fear—who can?—but It clutched at me in the dark, and the more I thought about It, the worse It became. It was a petty tyrant and a coward, for directly a grown-up appeared, sometimes if It only heard one in the distance, It vanished in a twinkling. My mother's voice could always exorcise It.

As one grows older the Bugbear changes Its habits. It no longer haunts every dark corner, although It lurks for a long time in the coal-cellar or the attic. Some people can never wholly rid themselves of childish associations with It. They refuse to sleep alone in a house, because they know It would keep them company. It quickens all their senses, especially in the shuddering hour before dawn, when It seems to stand behind one's chair, makes him hear doors creak, imagine footsteps on the stairs, and feel the touch of ghostly fingers.

The Bugbear has a comic side to its comprehensive character. It possesses a sense of mean humour. It often makes us rule our conduct by our neighbours' standards, not our own. It cuts our clothes in hideous fashion, because It will not allow us to be out of fashion. With its twin sister, Conventionality, It governs half the actions of our lives.

It will not allow us to be thought poor. It is always busy in bending backs, and uncovering heads to Fine Clothes and Fat Purses. How many a pompous gentleman has it trans-

formed into the likeness of a beaten schoolboy ! How many an arrogant lady has it turned into a cunning liar !

This universal Bugbear—this enemy of happiness—creates the hypocrite and encourages the hypochondriac, shuts up windows from fresh air, trembles at changes in the weather, loves to dwell on calamities, foresees accidents that never happen, prophesies evils, checks adventure, shrinks from knowledge. How eagerly It listens to old tales and feeds upon superstition.

The Bugbear loves the night, and dotes upon lonely places. The spot to meet it is a darkling wood, or a stretch of shadowed road, or the open moorland in the cold light of the moon. It makes Its presence felt, perhaps, with an unknown sound, or It turns a bush into a bear, or It shows Itself in a vague, indefinable wave in the brain of race recollection.

It lives in old, haunted houses, where It creeps up and down stairs, peoples the rooms with phantoms of the Past, and sighs with the wind in echoing corridors.

Fear is the very Proteus of the passions, perpetually changing Its shape and refusing to reveal Its secrets.

It is the most subtle of enemies, but once conquered, once subdued, It is powerless. It cannot enter a dauntless heart.

It is the strength of tyrants. It cringes and cajoles. It tarnishes bright Honour and stabs at Truth. The humblest human being is not too lowly to become Its prey. The proudest should beware of Its stealthy approach. It is in Its glory when It lashes shrieking Panic through a crowd, driving them mad.

It makes us shrink from Life. It fills us with horror at the thought of Death.

To kill Fear is to win Freedom.

VII.

A PRIM LITTLE DAME.

I MET her last at an evening party. It was before the Great War. She is not such a favourite in Society as she used to be.

She was a Prim Little Dame, fashionably dressed and so nearly perfect in all her appointments that only a very clever woman could have found a flaw. No man would have seen one. Men, as a rule, do not care for the little lady. They consider her "a woman's woman," and frequently approve of women (especially their wives) cultivating her acquaintance. They think she is silly, but safe.

She is very pretty to look at, and always keeps up appearances. That is the aim and end of her existence. See her at any hour of the day, or night, and she will be found fulfilling that laudable duty.

A busy little dame! She keeps her house in perfect order, pulls down the blinds to shut out an excess of sunlight, sweeps the skeletons into the cupboards, hangs the walls with pictures that she does not look at, fills the shelves with books that she never reads, dusts the ornaments that she does not admire, and carefully preserves the gifts of relatives whom she does not love.

She is very eloquent on the subject of one's duty to his relatives. There was a certain artist in Chelsea, a friend of mine, who nailed a plate on his front door—"No hawkers, no circulars, no bottles, no relations." The Prim Little Lady never spoke to him again.

Mrs. Conventionality is a social person. She appears at christenings—many more babies are christened, in fact, because she expects it, than owing to their parents' religious views—with engraved silver mugs, shaped like little beer barrels, and pursues the child from infancy onward with inappropriate presents until she finally drops a handsome wreath into its grave.

She is the honoured guest at weddings, being an indefatigable matchmaker. She thoroughly believes that nobody would get married if it were not for her.

There are many people now-a-days who are so uncivilized as to scratch her name from the list of guests. Only an elopement, in olden times, would have accounted for such an omission, for she set her face from the beginning against elopements, considering all unconventional people and their deeds, without any exception, either wicked or insane.

She insisted, until quite recently, on every bridegroom wearing the same style of clothes ; she selected every trousseau, she settled the duration of the honeymoon—she even cut the wedding-cake, and sent little crumbling bits of it to her friends in cardboard boxes.

How the Prim Little Dame ruled us in good Victorian days ! Women were then—and always have been—her advocates, worshippers, and victims.

How sternly she vetoed women doctors ! She is still frightened at the idea of women lawyers. How she lowered her prudish eyes at the sight of a woman alone in a staid old hansom cab ! How she blushed when a girl rode past her on a bicycle ! How she trembled at the impropriety of a suburban lady, unaccompanied by a man, eating a sandwich in a public restaurant !

She loves to disguise herself—" dress up "—and is often unrecognized by her unconscious followers. They mistake her for Prudence, even for Wisdom ; they consider her an indispensable guardian of Virtue. They willingly sacrifice their independence of action, freedom of thought, even their happiness in life, on the altar of her narrow hearthstone.

Let us be just to the Little Dame. She has her uses. She has been known to protect the weak. She teaches us punctuality in social affairs. She is a good guide in table manners.

These are trifles ? Yes ! The Prim Little Dame deals principally in trifles. She is negligible in the presence of great men and women. They have no need of her.

" Nice customs curt'sy to great kings."

Conventionality is still among us. I doubt if we will ever

be rid of her, or whether it would be altogether good if she were wholly banished, despite her faults.

She is less aggressive than of yore, but quite as punctilious. She lives on forms and ceremonies and empty words. She follows the fashions—a day late. Her existence is governed by rules and well-established customs. She travels everywhere, except in Bohemia. She has little to say to the Arts, and she is far too proper to wish to have anything to do with the Muses.

She loves stock phrases and half-truths. Her delight is the obvious. She smiles, but rarely laughs. She thoroughly believes in herself—it is the strongest of all her beliefs. It never fails her. It never will.

VIII.

THE RADIANT YOUTH.

“Who e’er thou art, thy Master see,
Who was, or is, or is to be.”

THE Radiant Youth—the Lord of the Flame—is the guest of our hearts from the dawn of life. He is born with us. He is our twin brother.

He is unrecognized in our childhood, or dimly suggested in familiar things. He enfolds us in his wings when we stand at our mother’s knee, or sleep in her arms. His beauty is so subdued, so heavenly in its soft radiance, that it shines like the nimbus of a saint. Then, unconsciously, we awaken the purest, the most lovely of all emotion. The unfathomable, selfless spirit of the greatest love in the world shines in our mother’s eyes.

Our days are filled with delicate, fleeting sensations of growth and change, heralds of the June of life. The sweet-scented manuscript of youth is opened before us and we read its poetry with wonder, fear, delight! Our dreams are sweetly indefinite. The whole world is continually melting and reforming. Nothing is still. Intense and innocent melancholy treads upon the heels of wild joy.

Eros suddenly flashes into the air, filling it with the perfume of the violet, tinting it with the sheen of the pearl. Earth is transformed by the Radiant Youth.

“All thoughts, all passions, all delights,
Whatever stirs our mortal frame,
All are but ministers of Love,
And feed his sacred flame.”

The divine purposes of creation are hidden in illusion.

Love, painted blind, lives in the eyes of the lover. He sees the beauty that others miss. He hears the music the old world has forgotten. The Radiant Youth inspires the poetry of his secret thoughts. He is moved to heroic deeds.

The Radiant Youth is ever on the wing. Bars and bolts, vows and laws, cannot hold him. He hovers on the threshold of the house, but rarely, rarely sits beside the hearth. Then—he comes in another form. His bright pinions are folded, his finger is on his lips, he studies us demurely.

We must cherish him and never forget, in spite of all his familiar ways, that he is a crowned king. If we banish his ministers, Chivalry and Courtesy, and Kindness and Grace. we insult his majesty. He shrinks from the coarse man. He flies from the cruel woman. He is at once the strongest and the most delicate of all our guests ; the most exacting, but the most unselfish, the darling of the soul—martyred by humanity.

A laughing Cupid is the youngest of the Immortal Gods. Eros, full-grown, the oldest and the wisest of them all. His influence spreads in ever-widening circles. The desire of one for one—the passion of youth—so ineffable and complete in its hour and season, evolves into the love of many, the love of all.

The first rhapsody of the Radiant Youth ends in the solemn music of Experience. We hear it in the morning of life, but it is far deeper in the full noon ; it is far sweeter at the approach of night.

Love is changeless, but ever changing—promise and fulfilment, fulfilment and promise, to the end of time.

The Great Illusion is the only Reality.

IX.

AN OLD RASCAL.

SCENE, a corn-field. Time, a summer evening. An old tramp leaning over a gate, chewing a sprig of rue. A shaggy dog sitting at his feet.

The man looks at the sunset, moodily. The dog watches the hedge, hoping for a rabbit. I lean on the gate too, some distance from the dog, who has a disagreeable habit of showing his teeth and snarling at strangers.

His master does not snarl, or show his teeth, but he gives one the same impression as the cur. He even chews the bitter sprig as if it were slowly poisoning him.

He is blind in one eye, but, oddly enough, the sightless side of his face is more malevolent than the other, as if the dingy eyebrow, thin nostril and crooked profile of lips had caught the mean expression squeezed out of the shrivelled eye-socket.

"Lovely clouds!" I said, pointing to the sky, that looked like a golden sea, with purple-sailed boats floating over it.

"Ah! It will rain to-morrow," said the old tramp, in a melancholy, minor key.

"Wet weather will be bad for the crops," said I.

"That's why it's bound to rain to-morrow," he repeated his gloomy prediction.

"This is a fine field of grain," said I.

"Chockful o' tares!" said my companion; "There's nasty corncockle, and heartsease, and shepherd's needle."

He leaned both elbows on the top bars of the gate and cradled his face in his bony hands. Then I saw there was a pack on his back, bulgy and dirty, tied together with strips of leather and old ribbon. It was not an unattractive pack, suggesting a secret, perhaps a miserly, hoard of treasures. There was a long, torn garland of convolvulus twisted round it.

"You are a great rambler?" I asked, glancing from this

odd bundle to his dusty shoes, rough, serviceable clothes, and broad-brimmed hat pulled low over his forehead.

"I have tramped the lanes and hilly roads; I have wandered into the highways and hedges for many years," he answered, slowly, as if he grudged satisfying my curiosity; "But I know the cities even better than the country. A wretched life, mine! A dull, doleful, dreary, dolorous life!"

The old boy groaned, but he seemed to hug his misery at the same time, repeating the words "dull, doleful, dreary, dolorous" with a certain unction of his own.

"Change your life!" said I, picking one of the poppies that grew in a little cluster at the side of the gate and looking into its purple-black, powdery heart.

"There is only one change I can make in this world—for the worse, my friend," he answered.

I felt the word "Friend" should be understood to mean "Foe," he looked at me so unpleasantly. The old curmudgeon! The ancient cagmag!

"Why not change for the better?" said I.

"Never, in my experience," he rejoined; "I always find that change means deterioration. If you think the worst of people you can't be disappointed. Deliberately look for the dark side and you won't be shocked when you see it."

The surly dog gave a sudden yelp.

"Old Wet Blanket understands me," said the man; "He has more intelligence, that dog, than the majority of human beings, present company not excepted. He'd nip a bit out of any man's leg as soon as look at him. You don't seem to like his bark, but it's not so bad as his bite."

The old man sat down on the grass and roughly caressed his dog. Then he unstrapped the wallet from his back, threw away the wild-flower garland, and opened it.

"All my possessions are here!" he exclaimed; "I live from hand to mouth, for I'm indifferent to comfort and despise luxury."

It was truly an odd collection. Even Wet Blanket, the dog, took an interest in it, snuffing round about and trying to worry the torn strips of leather and ribbon with which it had been fastened.

"Stolen goods!" said the old rascal, cocking his one eye at me with a leer on his face.

"Is that the truth?" said I.

"Assuredly! I resemble a certain friend of yours, a genial, short-sighted old gentleman. We both profess to love the truth."

"Who is the genial, short-sighted old gentleman?"

"He is called Sir Optimist by his flatterers."

"Sir Optimist is surely a young man, not an old one," I said; "Youth may squander optimism, but old age should treasure it."

"Epigrams are cheap to-day—three a penny!" muttered the old rascal.

He carefully arranged, on the ground beside him, a little pile of well-worn books from his knapsack—books about burials and degeneration, failure and misanthropy. Then he took out a few little glass bottles, an old silk purse, and a handful of gold and silver.

"Those are all my material belongings," said the old rascal; "Here are half-a-dozen tear-bottles. They are made of jade and onyx, rock-crystal and lapis lazuli, coral and amber. They have all been filled with pearly tears from bright eyes, shed for departed lovers and husbands.—Sob-sob-sob-blub-blub-blub! How the darlings wept! But some of the bottles were filled with laughter."

The old rascal pretended to cry into a dainty bottle of Italian porcelain, while Wet Blanket howled in sympathy.

"Little fools!" he continued; "They might have known that all lovers are silly dreamers and every husband weary of his choice."

"Are there no exceptions to the rule?" said I.

"Yes, my friend, it doesn't apply to lovers in their second childhood, or husbands during the first quarter of the honeymoon."

Then the old rascal let the gold and silver coins slip through his fingers in a tinkling shower.

"There is more power in these discs of shining metal than in all your philosophies. Here is the magic purse of Fortunatus—empty at last!" he went on, dangling the silk purse; "Here is a handful of dead hopes—" they fluttered from his

hands like the dust of withered leaves—"It was I who killed 'em. Sir Optimist, the braggart, would have kept 'em alive. Here is a bundle of lost ambitions. Look! How they stir and smoulder, though I blew out their fire ages ago. Here is a page of the torn manuscript of a poet's life; the passionate words of it are writ in scarlet. Here is a broken heart—a rare specimen!—and dozens of broken vows. They are very common. You can pick 'em up anywhere."

He laughed in mockery and plunged his hands deeper in the pack. A soft grey vapour curled round his fingers as he drew them out, gathered density as he waved his arms, as if he were playing with a gauze veil.

"This is my own little private fog!" the old rascal crowed; "It obscures the sunshine, takes the colour out of Nature, darkens the eyes and deadens the brains of my loyal friends. They think that it keeps them warm, but it's really as cold as a hoar-frost."

He puffed at the vapour through his cracked lips and it rolled away in misty clouds.

"My pack is always full of it," said the old rascal, indifferently; "Now, here is my book of Unwise Maxims for Narrow Minds."

He fluttered the leaves of a dog's-eared book, reading sentences at random:—

"Every silver cloud has a black lining."

"There is nothing certain but catastrophe."

"Old Age comes, but Happiness lingers."

"Life's a jest that we see too late."

"Man invented Religion to rule Woman. Woman invented Marriage to imprison Man. They are both failures."

"The cradle is as narrow as the grave. We stumble blindly from one to the other."

"Love is a fairy story with an unhappy ending."

"Selfishness is the mainspring of humanity's mechanism."

"Trust your enemy as far as you can see him, and your friend about the same distance."

"It never rains but it pours, and it's always beginning to rain."

"That book would be dear at any price," said I.

"Your friend, Sir Optimist, calls it cheap!"

The Pessimist began to repack his wallet, with a mournful expression on his haggard face. Now and again he paused and sat immovable, his hands clasped round his knees, his dreary eye fixed on the hedgerow, unmoved by its tangled beauty of flower and leaf—the yarrow, St. John's wort, and Herb Robert, the white bryony and woody nightshade.

The pæan of a skylark dropped out of the heavens, and I heard the dear, drowsy little song of a greenfinch, together with the call-notes of the sleek little chiffchaff and the erratic whitethroat. A soft breeze stirred the leafy branches.

Slowly the old rascal rose to his feet, strapped on his knapsack, and whistled to his dog. Wet Blanket gave a snarl, stretched himself, and started down the road.

"He knows the way I mean to go," said his master; "I can see a village in the distance. I am sure to find somebody to give me a welcome. Perhaps I shall meet my best friends, Master Discontent and Mistress Envy, or dear old Grumble and his little family of Bad Tempers."

He began to limp away, slowly, looking at me over his shoulder.

"Come with me!" he said; "I will take you to my leader, blind Misanthropy, and he will present you to dull Depression. I am only the beginning. I point the way. Come with me!"

Again, and yet again, he turned and beckoned with his skinny forefinger, until his figure mingled with the shadows of the overhanging branches, gliding among them like a sombre wraith.

The billowy clouds grew thunderous with summer heat as I turned my steps homewards.

At the cross-roads I passed an old acquaintance. He was swinging along with a light step, bare-headed, his hands clasped behind his back, quite indifferent to the threatened shower, the dust of the road, the languor of the sultry air. There was a tuft of traveller's-joy in his buttonhole. He was lilting the refrain of an old song. Strength and self-possession were expressed in every line of his body, kindness, wisdom, and child-like freshness in his countenance, harmony and gaiety in the tones of his voice.

It was Sir Optimist. He smiled at me, indulgently and happily, as we passed.

X.

A MONSTROUS SPECTRE.

THE man with a gardenia in his buttonhole suggested the idea.

The gardenia was lovely as a frozen snow-flake beneath his round, red face, glowing like the sun through a London fog in November.

It was the Annual Ladies' Night of the —— we will call it —— Benevolent Society of Modern Bacchanalians.

Held in one of the biggest, most gaudy rooms of a Piccadilly restaurant, every Bacchanalian and every Bacchante—the latter being the wives, daughters, nieces, and “lady friends” of the former—paid fifteen and sixpence per head, exclusive of wine, for the twelve-course dinner, to be followed by speeches, a reception, and light refreshments.

To many of the middle-aged couples it was the great event of the year, and they took it all very seriously. Affability beamed in the ladies' eyes. Hospitality exuded from the faces of the gentlemen. It was the custom for individual Bacchanalians to “take wine” with their friends at frequent intervals, jumping to their feet and bobbing at one another across the table.

The man with the gardenia buttonhole indulged in this ceremony so often that he looked like a jack-in-the-box, worked by a spring in perpetual motion.

“Brother Buck—I salute yourself and ladies!” was the usual formula, acknowledged by the Brother Buck with a touching of glasses, and by the fair—or otherwise—Bacchante with smiles and sips.

Gardenia Buttonhole was a jovial man, with eyes like an exuberant codfish and gills like a ruffled turkey-cock. He became, as the long array of rich and spiced foods passed on from course to course, more and more jocose and happy and gallant. His own Bacchante—Mrs. Gardenia, in black lace over pearl-grey satin and a king's ransom in heavy jewellery—

told her neighbour she had never seen Mr. Gardenia in such spirits, to which the neighbour responded that he was "a great lump of comicality," Mrs. Gardenia receiving this description of her husband as a high compliment.

From the minute when he swallowed his first hors d'oeuvre to the time when he scraped the melted sugar out of the bottom of his coffee-cup, Mr. Gardenia beamed and glowed, laughed and gobbled.

The ice melted away on his plate as he tasted it, under the heat of his sun-red face. The fruits looked pale, and the lovely flowers, down the centre of the table, drooped and withered.

Mr. Gardenia, when the speeches began, leaned back in his chair, cigar in hand, a picture of bland satisfaction—perfect repletion.

The man fascinated me, as a grotesque mask fascinates a half-frightened child. The smoke of his cigar went up in heavy rings—strangely heavy rings of density! He made me think of an ancient rotund god of the tobacco plant, shining as if he were made of bronze.

The room grew indistinct under my drooping eyelids.

The voice of the chairman, proposing the toast of the Benevolent Society of Modern Bacchanalians, changed into a drowsy hum, like the sound of a big bee, overladen with honey, returning to the hive on a summer evening.

The garish lights grew dim. The mingled odours of coffee and cookery, heavy perfume and tobacco, filled the air, already vaporous with the ascent from the ground—as if the kitchen were just beneath us—of the smell of haunch of mutton, game pie, and fat roast capons.

The man with the gardenia began to swell in size, looming through the great rings of smoke until he assumed the bulk of a giant. Even his white flower became dropsical and hung its heavy head.

The room itself slowly changed into a huge larder, hung with joints of meat, poultry, and venison. The chairs were barrels of oysters. Strings of dead larks festooned the walls.

All the savoury sauces ever invented by man were ranged upon shelves, from floor to ceiling, in gleaming white jars.

Jellies trembled in glass and sweets were heaped upon gilded dishes. Puffs and bubbles of pastry, too light for earth,

floated about in the air just over our heads. I perceived the green, oozy richness of turtle soup in silver bowls ; slices of salmon cooling in rings of fresh young cucumber ; a boar's head, with staring eyes and a lemon between his jaws ; aspic, and plump young partridges ; grouse so high that only the Stilton cheese was its social equal ; cavière and pâté de foie gras ; truffles, and ortolans ; ices and cakes, spices and marzipan ; the finest fruits out of season ; clotted cream, and black coffee.

Then a great fountain of bubbling, sparkling wine leapt up in the centre of the floor, gushing and gleaming like liquid fire. Brilliant light illumined the walls, and jets of liqueur spurted out—exciting crème de menthe, the lucid green of Grande Chartreuse mingling with the darker hue of maraschino, fatal absinthe, Grand Marnier, gay and yellow, the clear wine colour of sloe gin, and a dozen other glowing tints.

A rivulet of strong spirits gurgled, without overflowing, in a trough that skirted the wainscot.

The King of the Feast—erstwhile the man with the gardenia buttonhole—reclined on a gorgeous throne. He was crowned with vine leaves. Beautiful Bacchantes danced round him, half seen and half concealed in the misty, heavy-laden air.

He laughed aloud and cheered with his jovial, guttural, fruity voice. A horn of plenty that he grasped in his right hand perpetually showered forth a stream of fruits and sweetmeats. His left hand grasped a goblet. He had eaten so much he could eat no more.

A goodly group of Pleasant Vices were clustering round him fanning his heated face, refilling his cup before he drained it, murmuring flattering falsehoods in his big ears.

Laziness lolled at his feet, a willing footstool. Light Love kissed him with painted lips. Aimless Pleasure sat on his knee, playing with golden coins that slipped through her nerveless fingers ; the wizard Chance perpetually rattled a jingling tune with his dice-box, and Ribaldry told him shameless stories.

Strange and dazzling scene !

The feast was at its height. Shallow laughter rang and echoed in the great, dark dome of the hall. The Bacchantes

shrieked with joy and crushed the purple grapes under their wild, whirling feet. The spray from the fountain of wine fell through the air like drops of sulphur.

Colour and fragrance mingled together in streams of quivering vapour, rolling out of the ground, down the walls, from every glowing corner.

Then—it began to change, dissolving and fading away.

I saw the enthroned King with "Gluttony" written across his forehead. His Court was a monstrous nightmare. Every Pleasant Vice was transformed into a writhing scourge that twined and untwined, like a serpent, round his tortured limbs.

A long procession of Racking Pains crept out of the shadows.

Then I saw old Gout crawl, dripping, from the trough that skirted the wainscot, and try to drink of the sparkling wine, but fall upon his face, groaning and swearing, before he could reach it.

Fretful Dyspepsia was lurking near. Crazy Insomnia, with staring eyes that had no lids, rushed like a phantom across the hall, wailing for tranquil sleep.

The tiny, transparent ghosts of slaughtered skylarks fluttered about the strings of their dead bodies that hung in festoons. Shame to the man who turns the winged heralds of joy to the base uses of his bestial appetite!

The vague, uncertain forms of many animals—the mild-eyed oxen, the noble deer, the simple sheep, the arrowy hare—crowded into the misty hall. They were all shuddering with their terror of Man, most cruel, most cunning, most greedy of foes! Man, who understands but is indifferent to their agony. Man, who kills for sport, and thinks, in his arrogance, that all living things were created for his misuse and soulless pleasure.

The air grew fetid. The rich and delicate cookery disappeared, leaving the uncooked meats, poultry and game, in revolting change of hideous decay.

The monster Gluttony would have given all his wealth of silver bowls and gilded plate for a cup of pure water, a ripe fruit, a slice of bread—with the lost taste to enjoy it. He writhed and groaned, and his big, dull eyes rolled in their sockets.

A troop of Sins, to his great amazement, seized upon him and began to drag him between them about the floor, now this way, now that, torturing him with lost opportunities and ungratified desires.

He passed through a dozen transformations in as many minutes. Now he was paralyzed and insensible to pain ; now he was leaping and bounding in a frenzy ; now he was sleeping heavily, a mere log, without a dream ; now he was unable to close his eyes in the horror of delirium.

Sulphurous fumes swept through the hall. The lights burned blue. A cloud of vapour dropped from the roof, turning from the colour of foggy yellow, as it fell, to thick white. At first it was like a veil, stretching from wall to wall, but it soon began to concentrate and dwindle—smaller—smaller—more white—.

Then I saw it was nothing more or less than a withered gardenia in the buttonhole of a jovial, stout, elderly man.

“Gentlemen!” said the chairman, “We will drink to the continued happiness and prosperity of the Benovolent Society of Modern Bacchanalians.”

XI.

THE MAIDEN KNIGHT.

“ A maiden knight—to me is given
Such hope, I know not fear;
I yearn to breathe the airs of heaven
That often meet me here.”

IT was a cold and windy night in October. The hills were wrapped in gloom, the fields in a veil of mist.

A Knight, lightly armed, rode along the winding lanes, almost like a shadow in the gathering darkness of the hedges. He was young, but very strong and experienced. It was an age of many dangers, when the broom of the Plantagenet was the royal flower of England, bands of lawless robbers infested the uncleared country, and the man who rode along the King's Highway carried his life in his hands.

The Knight was indifferent to the darkness and solitude. His thoughts were in the Past. He had passed along the same road, under the same lowering skies, many hundred times.

He had ridden in the train of Arthur, in the golden days of chivalry. He had followed the Great Alfred. He had marched shoulder to shoulder with sturdy Roman soldiers. He had led the blue-eyed Saxons. He had chanted the songs of Normandy with the Conqueror's army.

His thoughts turned to the Future.

It opened before him like a magic book, gilded and illumined with glorious deeds.

Ever undaunted and lightly armed, he saw himself in many battles.

In the Middle Ages he would still be a warrior, now with the Red Rose in his helmet, now with the White. He would fight with Harry Monmouth on St. Crispin's Day. He would stand beside Richmond on Bosworth Field.

He would fire the noble hearts of Christian Martyrs. He would sail the seas with the famous adventurers of the

Spacious Days. He would draw the sword of freedom with John Hampden. He would flash the appeal of Nelson in Trafalgar Bay. He would cheer at the victory at Waterloo. He would inspire the heroism at Delhi, and the endurance at Lucknow. He would obey the fatal command to glory at Balaclava.

He would spring to the call of duty at the opening of the Great War. He would fight in the Retreat from Mons. He would be at the Battle of the Marne. He would share the glory of Gallipoli. He would keep watch and ward in the grey North Sea. He would fly into the darkness against the monster Zeppelins and send the horrors of the night, flaming, to their doom.

These are the mighty deeds of the Maiden Knight.

Great in War, he is great in Peace. No country, no religion, no tradition, binds him. He belongs to all the world. Tyranny falls at his feet. Scorn and hatred cannot wound him. Life, in all its fulness, is the brother-in-arms he loves and cherishes, but Death is as welcome to his tranquil soul.

He has scaled the walls of Heaven. He has conquered the depths of Hell.

The Maiden Knight is the passionate lover of Liberty. It is he alone who wins her starry crown.

The Maiden Knight is the world's iconoclast. He dares to speak. He dares to think. He dares to act. He dares to die. He sails upon unknown seas. He is the child of stern, resistless Nature, and loves her in her fiercest moods. He is the beloved of Man, and lives in the heart of Woman. He is the inspiration of Youth, the solace of Age.

The Maiden Knight is never conquered, but ever the conqueror.

Follow him! Follow him! In the vital decisions of your life, in your lightest words, follow Courage. He is with us to-day, in our cities, in our villages, in our homes—dauntless, lightly armed, invincible—even as I saw him, in my daydream, as a Knight of long ago.

XII.

VEXATIOUS IMPS.

THERE is a lady in our neighbourhood who is the victim, whether she goes abroad or stays at home, of a legion of little Imps.

You know the type of lady I mean !

There is an old gentleman, also, in our neighbourhood—and in yours—who possesses an equally big horde, but of a different sort.

The lady talks about her Imps more than the gentleman. She is rather proud of them, in fact, and takes it ill if you drive any of them away. She enjoys mild martyrdom.

The gentleman is rendered morose, especially in his home circle.

They are equally injured, and equally certain that their Imps are far more vexatious than anybody else's Imps.

Her husband, her children, and her servants are the principal excuses for the lady's legion. His business, his health, and the Government are responsible for the gentleman's horde. They would both be capable of fighting with great troubles, but little Worries are their conquerors.

Little Worries, once allowed to gain a foothold, are the most obstinate and annoying guests we can entertain in our lives. They are Imps who make a point of out-staying their welcome. We begin with two or three, perhaps, but they quickly increase in number, and never leave us.

If we manage, on occasion, to forget them, it is only for a little while, for they love to lie in ambush, ready to spring out upon us directly our minutes of oblivion are over.

The Vexatious Imps are busy, untiring workers. Some of them are diggers and delvers, and spend their whole existence in piling up mountains out of mole-hills. Others manipulate petty storms in convenient tea-cups. Others pass their days in warning people of the broken planks and rotten piers of

bridges long before they are reached and discovered to be quite sound.

The lady in our neighbourhood, for those who have the eyes to see, is simply surrounded by a bodyguard of Imps. If her husband is an hour late in the evening, they present a highly-coloured picture to her imagination of the unhappy man in a street accident, or seized with apoplexy, or knocked down and robbed. The Imps show her the body being carried into her house, followed by a portrait of herself as an inconsolable widow.

If one of her children tumbles down, or cuts its finger, the Imps make a sketch of a fractured skull or a case of septic poisoning. One swallow does not make a summer, but one sneeze, in the good lady's opinion, foretells pneumonia.

A smoky chimney suggests to her the burning down of her house; a burst water-pipe, an eternal dearth of plumbers; a shower of rain in June, the end of the warm weather.

The gentleman in our neighbourhood is even more harassed by the Imps of the weather and the Imps of bad health. A good appetite and sound sleep fail to give him confidence.

The Imps show him a threatening cloud in the sunniest sky. They convince him that his holidays, long before they are due, will occur in the wettest, coldest month of the year. He holds unending conversations with the Imps on the subject of his digestion. They persuade him to study his symptoms, run to doctors, discover salvation in a glass of hot water before breakfast, or a glass of cold water after dinner, or a charcoal biscuit.

The Imps are greatly attached to affectionate people, making them ultra-sensitive and causing them to brood over chance phrases and imagined slights.

It would be rare sport, if it were not so distressing, to watch the Little Worries at work. They are more thoroughly successful in the art of transforming humanity—give them time—than even the great troubles of life. They change their victims' appearance as skilfully as a clever actor "makes up" his face to appear upon the stage.

It is a most laborious process, for their efforts are constantly baffled. Happiness has been known to undo the work of months, and Faith to spoil it altogether. Jolly laughter is

one of their lighter foes, and they hate our good old Common Sense.

Myriad tiny Imps labour in unison. It is sorrow and pain that dig deep furrows in our faces, but Little Worries are responsible for the criss-cross wrinkles and petty perpendicular lines that spoil so many foreheads. The Imps work at them continually with their deft little hands, modelling, kneading, and driving them home.

The mouth is a feature they love to transform. Scores of these "little folk" devote themselves to pulling down the corners and making them look as narrow and fretful as they possibly can. More vindictive Imps spend their time in deepening "crow's feet" round the eyes, gleefully anticipating the moderate methods of old Time. Much greater patience is needed in changing the colour of our locks, but in nine cases out of ten the dread of youth—a first grey hair—is the result of their handicraft.

Vexatious Imps! I renounce them, I scorn them, I defy them—my life, all the same, is full of Little Worries. What do *you* say?

XIII.

OUR GUARDIAN ANGEL.

IF Love, the Radiant Youth, is born our twin brother ; Faith, the Guardian Angel, is born our twin sister.

We find her at our mother's breast. She breathes the same air. She grows with our growth. She is the mirror of ourselves. She teaches us, long before we are awakened to consciousness of the truth, that the world is ready for us. There is our bed to lie on, our welcome food, the fresh, sweet air, the vital sunshine. Faith is always with us, but we do not know it.

She is a child in our childhood. We rarely see her in greater beauty than in the days of early youth. Then she is incomparable.

She runs out with us in the dew of the morning to see the fairy rings upon the grass. She looks over our shoulders as we read our first books. We see "the young-eyed cherubims," when she is pointing upward, as we look into the blue depths of heaven.

She makes us utterly loyal to our friends. She tells us that our father is all-strong, our mother infallible, our teachers unutterably wise. She makes our chosen companions ideal.

She wears, in the rainbow-tinted days of adolescence, a different form.

We find her wandering in desolate places, lost in devout dreams. She is mysterious and harmonious ; a young recluse. Her saddest thoughts are sweet and tender. Her gaiety is divinely sad.

When Love first comes to us our Faith is changed again, no less our Guardian Angel, but hidden in the soft haze of the young senses.

She comes to us, in the awakening of Ambition, in yet another form, possessing all our hearts, brightening our eyes, thrusting aside obstacles, scorning dangers, laughing at outworn traditions. Then we have faith in ourselves. We are

invincible. Be careful not to allow foolish Conceit, or braggart Arrogance, to usurp her throne.

It is Faith that leads us to hero-worship, to the love of humanity, to the altar of self-sacrifice. It is Faith in the laws of Infinite God—forever unseen, forever revealing His Omnipotence—that is the inspiration of our souls.

All conceptions of our Guardian Angel are but as the dim, wavering reflection of clouds upon the water. We cannot see her clearly, but we can always follow her.

To lose her utterly, is to lose all confidence, all courage, all hope. We do not fear the darkness of night—the shadow of death—if she is with us.

She lives forever.



XIV.

THE HIDDEN TERROR.

THIS is the journey that I made with Trouble.

It was dusk—the dusk of life—when we started together.

The face of Trouble was shrouded in her mantle. I had met her often before. At first it had been easy to shake her off, but sour Disappointment—misshapen dwarf—again and again brought her back. Carping Bitterness brought her back. Idle hours brought her back. Petty Poverty brought her back. Trouble became my constant friend.

The wind was scudding over bleak, open country. The hills looked jagged against the sky, and there was a dense wood at the foot of the stubble field where Trouble led me by the hand.

It was a magic world, created in the dark places of my sleeping brain. A magic moon hung, like a wasted lamp, over the dead embers of the fire of the sunken sun.

The earth was heavy under my feet, seeming to hold me back. There was the jargon of mournful birds.

Trouble led me onward slowly. We were surrounded by the strangest forms, resembling herself, but shadowy and vague. I recognized, whenever their pale, averted faces turned towards me for a second of time, the half-forgotten Sorrows and Cares of the past. Even my childhood's griefs were there—indefinite little wraiths, smiling through tears.

The trees were growing thinly on the outskirts of the wood, many of them bare of foliage on the windward side, many stunted, many blackened by lightning, their branches forked and ragged as the flashes that had riven and killed them.

There were no flowers, no ferns. The ground was dank and brown.

The wind dropped, as we passed under the trees, from a wintry blast into the moaning of an Autumn night. It was

very sombre. The ghosts of old Sorrows flitted away and my memory grew dim.

New phantoms, frail as gossamer, began to haunt me, gliding between the trunks of the trees, stooping forward to touch me with cold fingers, rising out of the earth, sinking back into the earth, passing from one shape to another in the swift silence of thought.

Melancholy hamadryads, with long, heavy hair, watched us with wonder in their great, soft, soulless eyes. Frightened elfins fled before us. I saw the Elemental Nature Spirits brooding in the purple shadows.

Farther and farther into the wood we passed, until it grew boundless—a forest of the growth of hundreds of years.

Then I was all alone in the failure of my life. Trouble had grown into utter Failure and loomed gigantic, above, beyond, around me.

I tried to draw back, but the branches of the trees swerved down and locked behind me. Not a leaf moved; even the low moaning of the wind had stopped.

The air was wet upon my face. I could hardly drag my weary limbs, and my head throbbed with dull pain.

All fresh and lovely things were forgotten. Airy fancies were no more, or the memory of love, or the changing hopes of youth and age, or the deep consolation of faith.

It was all over.

I should never again see the dawn of an April day in a wood of pale primroses; I should never again hear the music of the sea upon the shore; I should never again look into the eyes I love; I should never again feel the heart I love beating against my own.

On and on in the terrible forest!

The earth gradually sloped into a valley of marsh, with dead rushes, tangled reeds, poisoned ivy. A faint smell of decay filled the air.

There was a screen, directly in front of me, formed by the interwoven boughs of a sycamore. I laid my hands upon it, with an intense—fevered—painful—desire to push my way through.

The old warning of wisdom rang in my ears:—"Be bold! Be bold! Be not too bold!"

I went on. I went on. The branches bent before me. I thrust them aside—

I saw the Hidden Terror!

I looked upon Despair.

For one shuddering minute I tried to read the fathomless eyes of a silent spectre. Death was mirrored in their depths. Hope, like a spurned woman, lay across his knees, motionless. The bright wings of Love were torn like a bird between his hands; Courage, broken and bleeding, struggled vainly to rise from beneath the crushing weight of his foot.

The darkness was shot with lurid gleams of dull red light. The taste of bitter waters clung to my lips, but my mouth within was parched with thirst. I was suddenly seized with holy fear, blinded with a rush of pent-up tears, and I fled from the silent horror of the secret forest.

My spirit flashed into empty space. The air of the heavens upheld me. The earth, like a fallen star, was gone. I was lost in a sense of joy.

Lost in light—sailing in ether—I began to fall gently, gently, fall forever—

Then I awoke.

XV.

A PRETTY FELLOW.

HE was very young when I saw him first. It was long ago—years ago.

I was alone, when we met, in an old English garden. Roses were in bloom, the lawns as smooth as velvet, and the herbaceous borders aflame with flowers. The air seemed to quiver with light, and the languid Summer breezes were all asleep.

When I first noticed the Pretty Fellow, against a background of pink pearl azaleas, he looked like a blossom himself. But as he approached me, oblivious of my presence, I saw that he was delicate, strong, springy of step, buoyant of form.

It did not strike me as odd at the time, but only in recollection, that his dress was fantastic and quaint, as if he were going to a fairies' fancy ball.

Like a Florentine of the fourteenth century, he wore his long sleeves, pointed shoes, and hooded cape with conscious grace. His doublet was blue, studded with turquoise and seed pearls; one leg of his tights white, the other to match the doublet. A pink carnation was fastened in his breast. At his side strutted a peacock, with his gorgeous tail sweeping along the grass, like a proud lady's train.

The pretty boy held a book of poems in his hand—sonnets to his mistress's eyebrow—and sighed now and again, as if the heat of the day oppressed his daintiness. He stood still, when a butterfly hovered over his head, his face upturned, and the colour deepening with sheer delight.

Then he stretched himself at full length on the grass, in exquisite languor. The peacock stood still beside him, as immovable as a bird of shimmering metal. The butterfly fluttered away over the lavender.

The Pretty Fellow's red lips pouted into a smile, his curly hair shaded his sun-kissed cheeks; his long eyelashes concealed his soft eyes.

Never, since Narcissus fell in love with his own image in the stream, or bright Adonis caught the fancy of the grey-eyed goddess, was a more perfect youth than my young Lord Vanity in the old world garden.

I saw him in a bewitching form, but others tell me he is not at all a Pretty Fellow. We have all met him in our time.

Oh, yes! Even you, my clerical friend, with your solemn face and staid demeanour—have you quite forgotten when your own eloquence amazed you and you felt the arms of your curate's coat puffing out into lawn sleeves? Even you, my elderly dame—have *you* forgotten when Somebody said you were an angel of beauty and you thoroughly believed him! Even you, my great reformer! Are you certain that your utter lack of vanity is not in itself a vanity?

Boys and girls are instinctively friends with the Pretty Fellow. Little children are unconsciously comic when they choose him for a playmate. Give Miss Anne, aged four, a gay sash or a new pair of shoes, and the spirit of Vanity himself does not look in the glass with greater satisfaction. Allow Master Tommy to don his elder brother's out-grown velvet knickerbockers, and watch him swagger across the room!

The Pretty Fellow has always been a dandy, but very much more besides. The perfection of personal appearance is far from the end of his ideal. If we are only rich, he makes us buy more houses than we care to live in, more food than we can eat, more clothes than we can wear; if we are poor, he makes us slaves to the tradition of a "best room" and afraid of "next door's" opinion.

Half the pretty girls are in love with him. It is a passion that often spoils their beauty. He is a deft hand at turning people's heads in the wrong direction. It is in his power to make any man ridiculous and rob any woman of her charm.

But these things happen when he is allowed to become our master. Then the Pretty Fellow turns into an overweening old bore. He weakens our sensibility, warps our judgment—even bewitches our looking-glasses, so that they no longer reflect our faces and figures as our friends know them, but show us pictures of impossible beings only slightly resembling ourselves.

The Pretty Fellow, thus corrupted, rarely recovers his old

foolish, but comparatively harmless, form. As we grow older, he grows more grotesque, sitting with us in our prim drawing-rooms, dining with us at our clubs, making us tell the same personal anecdotes over and over again, allowing us to sing when our voices are cracked, choosing our clothes of a too youthful pattern, even persuading us to dye our hair and touch our old faces with artificial bloom.

Another of his pranks—easily forgiven—is to turn our own particular geese into swans and make us point them out to all beholders, boasting of their white plumage and long necks.

He is accustomed, in a less mischievous mood, to show people their children decked with imaginary graces. A father sees little Elizabeth, with her snub nose and freckles, as a perfect beauty, and a mother discovers in little Frank, who stands at the bottom of his class, the brightest pupil in his school.

Keep the Pretty Fellow in his right place—on the surface of life. Never be ruled by him. Forgive his foibles in others and be tolerant with his excesses. Remember, before you throw stones, that he probably gave valuable assistance in building your own glass-house.

As long as there is triviality in the world—as long there are men and women to people it—human nature will be all unchanged.

As it is written in Ecclesiastes :—"Vanity of vanities, all is vanity . . . for there is no new thing under the sun."

XVI.

THE BALEFUL SHADOW.

DO you know the tale of a man who lost his shadow? It was a literal shadow in his case, and everybody in the light of the sun or moon could see what had happened to the poor wretch.

The shadow that we call Disillusion is a very different matter. We would gladly lose It—give It to our enemies. It always covers the brightest spot on earth, withers the fairest flower, casts Itself in front of our boldest steps.

Disillusion is a sickness of the soul ; the terror of Love ; the enemy of Faith and Hope—that Faith and Hope alone can conquer.

Let us run out, like merry children, once more into the garden of youth. The roses are sparkling with diamonds ; every blade of grass shakes a fairy shower on the soft earth ; the sky is still pale, but flushing deeper every minute ; a thrush and the morning lark are singing.

Visionary fields are stretching in the distance, with the world of romance and adventure lying beyond them.

We think the summer will last for the whole of our lives. Can the sun, rising so slowly, ever set? Will we ever be weary and discouraged? Shall we ever know satiety?

Alas! the shadow of Disillusion passes over the ground. The size of the garden dwindles, its flowers fade, the distant fields are barren.

It is a wholly deceptive shadow, now behind us, now in front, now at our side, like a hated companion we cannot escape. It is often indefinite. We feel Its approach instinctively, but fight against It and refuse to acknowledge Its presence.

When I try to endow the Baleful Shadow with life—give it features and shape—I see It as a spectral thing, cold-blooded, not intangible, but extraordinarily elusive. It resembles a reflection of one who looks into a wavy, poor piece of glass

or the slightly rippling surface of water, beholding an image like and unlike himself.

The greatest victory of Love is to know Disillusion and still to love.

The spectral thing is the third in many a friendship. It is rarely admitted to that unreal reality, the celebration of a wedding, but It waits on the threshold patiently and too often steps into the carriage that bears away the bride and bridegroom. The creature loves a lengthy honeymoon, although It meets with a shuddering reception on Its first appearance. It is quite at home in the family circle, as little observed after a while as the old pictures on the walls or the accustomed ornaments on the mantelpiece.

What would our friends, the novelists, do without the help of Disillusion in ravelling their plots? It has inspired many of our melancholy poets. It is a teacher of hard lessons, good to learn.

It lifts the mask that hides Reality. If we are strong and steadfast enough to meet It as a friend—hug It in our arms—Its terror vanishes. It slips away like a Shadow indeed.

Look at Disillusion from another standpoint. It is wrapped about the world like an endless succession of veils. Strip one away—strip a hundred away—and we are as far from knowing the secrets concealed as ever we were.

We think the flower blooms for beauty alone, but when we are undeceived by the botanist, are we any nearer to the mystery of its growth?

We watch the flight of a bird, and the ornithologist promptly dispels our wonder with the dissection of a wing, but can he give us, with his knowledge, the momentary rapture of the spirit that leaps to heaven's blue in the song of the nightingale?

We fall in love, and the wiseacre tells us the reason of love—or Benedick, the married man, puts it in a nutshell, "The world must be peopled," but we are only disillusioned to seek another illusion.

In brief, we cannot evade the Baleful Shadow, but it always remains a shadow. It is never real.

Illusion is dead! Long live Illusion!

XVII.

THE DANCING CHILD.

I MET the Dancing Child in a wood of bluebells and young pines.

She was quite unconscious of my presence, although she approached me gaily, her arms full of flowers and leaves.

Her springing feet hardly touched the ground ; the aureola of her hair shone and glimmered in the chequered shade ; she swayed like an anemone, newly opened by the wind.

As I looked at her, amazed by her beauty, the wood was slowly filled with strange, transparent, airy beings. At first I could only wonder and gaze, gaze and wonder. They faded and returned, passed through the trees and the bluebells, floated into the atmosphere, beckoned me and waved their phantom hands.

The Dancing Child smiled and gathered flowers.

Then I saw that the lovely, illusive throng was showing me the first delights of my own life. My dreams were here and the poems I have written in imagination only, every one of them a thought-form.

I saw the figure of my First Love—fleeting, tender, so young that it hardly knew itself. I saw the fancies of older years—heralds of the Radiant Youth—some of them veiled in a mist of light tears, some of them sparkling with mirth.

Then I saw the Beloved of my Life, as I knew him first, with the old familiar, whimsical smile ; I heard the echo of his voice, never forgotten, all unchanged by the cruel change of years.

I saw the fulfilment of different hopes, the soft consolation of quiet days, the patience and happiness born of struggle and effort, the pleasure and thrill of adventurous deeds.

When I pursued the Dancing Child she fled from me, still luring me on with glances over her shoulder, nods and smiles and playful laughter.

She ran back, when I stood still, holding out her flowers

and begging me to follow. She was never still, but her movements were so graceful that they disturbed one no more than the shaking of the leaves of the aspen, or the ripple-ripple-ripple of little waves on the sand.

It was very wonderful to see how the bluebells she gathered, even the flowers and leaves her dancing feet had touched, bloomed into deeper colour and richer green.

A hundred dainty Fancies played about her. She was so strong that the young pines bent aside as she danced past them, but so fragile that I could brush her away like a handful of thistledown.

She followed me, when I wandered from the wood, but I could not see her so distinctly. The change was not in her, but in me. She might have appeared to another as captivating in the sunny fields, but she is always more clearly seen by me in the depths of a wood of bluebells.

All the day she never left me, sometimes disappearing for an hour, only to return with unchanged gaiety and grace.

Her mood changed, as the sun began to set, and she grew pensive. Twining her flowers into a long garland, she threw it round my neck and drew me, by that delicate chain, to the top of a grassy hill. The woods and pastures, stretched below, were like a painted picture in the stillness of the late afternoon. A blackbird sang in the hedge behind us. The breezes died away in little puffs of languor.

The Spirit of Delight murmured in my ear—or I read her thoughts—or I put my own daydream into words—

“Mine are the gifts of priceless value.

“Mine is the form of a Dancing Child, eternally gay and innocent.

“I give you the world that belongs to me, I give you the joys that all may share—all may possess—all may bequeath to their heirs.

“I give you the sheet of pearl in the sky at dawn, the countless diamonds that sparkle on the grass, the gold of high noon, the silver of twilight, the jacinth and rubies of sunset, and the restful shades of night.

“I give you quiet streams and wild raspberries, waterfalls and the whispering rushes. I give you the song of birds. I give you the darling aconites and snowdrops, violets and cow-

slips. I give you the pure snow, and the blustering, healthy, roaring winds.

"I give you the quiet talk of friends, the welcome jest, the new life in laughter.

"I give you Love.

"I give you pleasant odours, and the subtle joy of touch.

"I give you poetry and old tales, music and the joys of thought. I give you plays and fairy stories. I make your work light and simple. It will always be so, if you find me in it.

"I am far to seek for the cruel and selfish, but I come at a word to the gentle who call me.

"I am the Spirit of Delight."

The woods and pastures were wrapped in shadows.

I fared homewards, with a light step, carrying my bunch of bluebells.

XVIII.

A PECULIAR COUPLE.

IT was an old friend of mine who introduced me to the Peculiar Couple. He took me to see them.

It is not an easy house to find, unless one is a kindred spirit of its owners, but if that is the case he need not ask his way. He will know it instinctively.

My old friend is not at all an absent-minded man, and possesses a gift for locality, but he seemed doubtful of the right road to take.

"First of all," he said, "We have to get into a Groove. It's one of the shortest cuts to Mr. and Mrs. Boredom's."

By strolling down Idle Avenue, dawdling through Dull Street, skirting Convention Park, and leaving Novelty Road and Change Lane behind us, we reached one of the many Grooves leading to our destination.

The house belonging to Mr. and Mrs. Boredom stood in its own grounds, close to a slough of despond.

It was impossible to decide upon its name, for "Dreary Lodge" was printed on one of the gates, "Old Habit House" on the other, while a signpost pointed it out as "Melancholy Manor," and on the front door itself appeared the designation "Dead-and-Alive Cottage."

All the stunted trees were cut the same shape; the wide gravel paths were bordered by narrow beds, in which there were regiments of little sticks showing where the seeds had been planted that would never come up; there were no birds or butterflies, but snails, slugs, and caterpillars abounded; the high walls were topped with rusty iron spikes.

The house itself was built of grey stone, square and solid. It might have been a prison with its slits of windows, peeping out of the greyness like the little, inquisitive eyes of a sick old man.

There was an apparently empty dove-cot and an empty dog-kennel, but as we approached two old quarrelsome doves

fluttered feebly out of the former, pecking at each other, and a dispirited dog crawled out of the latter.

The heavy front door was studded with big nails. The brass knocker was shaped like a skull. When we rang the heavy bell it clanged for several minutes in exactly the same key at the end as at the beginning.

A tall, pale page-boy opened the door, in a threadbare suit, with all the little buttons tarnished.

"Well, young Misanthrope!" exclaimed my friend; "Master and mistress at home?"

"They never go out," said the page, in a sad voice.

He admitted us, without another word, to a stone-flagged hall, bare of furniture, cold as a vault, and filled with a faint odour of cooking.

"This house always smells of the same thing!" said my old friend; "You must dine on roast mutton every day, young Misanthrope."

"We do! We live on the cold shoulder and humble pie," said the page, leading the way across the hall.

"Is his name really Misanthrope?" I whispered.

"No, I call him that for short," rejoined my friend; "His real name is Bill—because he's never been paid. It's the same with all the Boredoms' servants. The cook is accustomed to cooking the same meals every day, the nurse finds every new baby is exactly like its predecessor, the chauffeur is always repairing the car after the same breakdown. They're all used to it."

The page opened a door in a dark corner of the hall and announced us in a most uncomplimentary manner:—

"Here's a couple of visitors! You don't want to see 'em, but what does anything matter?"

We entered a big room, furnished in a heavy, horse-hairy, early Victorian style, with dark curtains at the windows. The grate was heaped with ashes on the top of which a small fire was struggling to keep alight; there were shelves of well-worn books, all bound alike, and vases of dyed, dusty grasses.

Our host and hostess were seated on either side of the fire, the gentleman reading a newspaper, the lady darning black stockings. They both looked up, but with obvious indifference.

"How d'yer do, Boredom?" said my friend; "Not at all pleased to see you again! How do *you* do, Mrs. Boredom?"

Mr. Boredom rose at this, submitted to the proffered hand shake, and spoke to his wife in a low, flat tone of voice.

"Monotony, my dear! Monotony, my dear!"

The lady bade us welcome in a voice that sounded like a cracked echo of her husband's, but did not stop for a minute in her darning.

Mr. Boredom was fat and puffy. His head resembled the top of a quartern loaf, with features that had been pinched and kneaded into shape just before the dough set. Mrs. Boredom was thin and bloodless, like a child's rag-doll when the stuffing has come out. They both wore spectacles—large, staring goggles, not at all rose-coloured—and were very round-shouldered.

Mr. Boredom, taking up the newspaper he had dropped on the floor, offered to read aloud—and began, before we had time to answer. I think the stockings Mrs. Boredom was darning must have been bewitched by some mischievous fairy, for directly she had finished one pair another broke into holes. Her work was endless.

It was the same fairy, I imagine, who had caused the hands of the grandfather's clock in a corner of the room to stop, so that it was always the same time in spite of its loud, continual tick-tock-tick-tock; he had also told the cat on the hearth to wash and rub its left ear—lick-lick-lick-wash-wash-wash—over and over again, and taught an old parrot with a paucity of feathers, in a dingy cage, to repeat hoarsely the same sentence, "Pretty-Polly-Poor-Poll-Pretty-Polly-Poor-Poll!" with all the garrulity of age.

When Mr. Boredom had finished the newspaper article he paused, polished his spectacles, looked approvingly at his dear Monotony, and then read it again from beginning to end.

After a couple of hours spent in this way, to the perpetual accompaniment of tick-tock-tick-tock-Pretty-Polly-Poor-Poll, the despondent page appeared at the door, jerked his thumb over his shoulder and announced—

"Tea—tannin—ready!"

Mr. Boredom folded up the newspaper and Mrs. Boredom laid aside her work. The dining-room was very long and lofty,

festooned with gigantic cobwebs. There was a narrow table down the centre, set with dozens of mugs and plates.

Monotony took her seat behind the biggest teapot I have ever seen. My friend sat on her right hand, I took my place on her left.

Then the door at the far end of the room opened, and the most astonishing nightmare procession of under-sized children appeared upon the scene. They were marshalled by the head nurse, a black-browed dame, whom my friend whispered me across the table was named Mrs. Routine, with the help of three disagreeable nursemaids—Miss Sulks, Miss Temper, and Miss Dumps.

The children were exactly alike, except in size, for they diminished from the eldest to the youngest like the pipes of an organ, and their faces had about as much expression. They all kept their mouths open and they all wore goggles.

"These are our dear little Bores!" said Mr. Boredom, proudly, as the appalling children took their places at the table; "Monotony, my dear, pour out the tannin."

Monotony instantly began to fill the yellow mugs with tea, while the nursemaids gave each child a slice of bread-and-scrape.

I could not take my eyes off the little Bores, as they began to munch, like a colony of silkworms, at just the same moment. Some of them were puffy and fat, like Mr. Boredom; others were scraggy and lean, like Mrs. Boredom. The babies of the family—twins—were pale little horrors, who seemed to be hiding behind their big spectacles.

Not a word was spoken during tea, except by my old friend. Nothing can quench his good spirits. Mr. Boredom, when we had finished, asked the children a long series of questions, to which they replied as promptly, but with as little interest, as third-rate actors answering to their cues.

"What have you been doing to-day, little Number One?" he said, looking at the eldest child.

"Please, Papa, I've been out to a Silver Wedding banquet. There was a big party, but only the husband and wife knew I was there. They are old friends of mine."

"Very good! Now, little Number Two?"

"Please, Papa, I've been sitting in a stuffy room with a rich old lady and her poor relations."

"Capital! Three?"

"Please, Papa," answered the third little Bore, with a suggestion of a snigger; "I've been out walking with a girl and her elderly lover. They are going to be married soon. Then, dear Papa, I'll go to live with them altogether, until I can persuade a playmate of mine, little Hate, to take my place."

"Happy idea!" said Mr. Boredom; "What have you to say for yourself, Number Four?"

Number Four was yawning horribly.

"I'm very good, Papa, I am! I've been listening to sermons and lectures all the week," he mumbled.

Directly a child had answered Papa's question it relapsed into dull silence, twiddling its thumbs, or staring at the ceiling.

When the last mug was emptied and the last slice of bread-and scrape eaten, all the little Bores rose to their feet—they were flat-footed, by the way, and bandy-legged—and filed out of the room in the order they had entered it, marshalled by Mrs. Routine.

Mr. and Mrs. Boredom, my friend and I then returned to the sitting-room. Tick-tock-tick-tock said the old clock in the corner; "Pretty-Polly-Poor-Poll" hoarsely muttered the parrot. The fire was still struggling to keep alight. The cat was washing its left ear.

Mr. Boredom sat down on his side of the hearth, polished his spectacles, and began to read the newspaper aloud. His dear Monotony sat down opposite to him and took up her darning.

My old friend beckoned; we crept out of the room, and across the chilly hall. We stood in the porch for a few minutes, looking at the rain that drizzled over the stunted trees, gravel walks, and rusty iron spikes.

"If you come again to-morrow, or wait for twenty years, you will find the Peculiar Couple quite unchanged," said my friend; "When Monotony is wedded to hopeless Boredom it's a union that lasts a long time. The little Bores become big Bores and leave the old home, but others arrive to take their places. That family is endless!"

He seemed depressed for a minute, then he laughed his genial laugh, and pulled me forcibly away. The sun burst out as we left the miserable garden behind us. He laughed again and looked at me slyly.

"Never forget," he said, "that there are many ways to this house, but you must not think that all people, whose tastes happen to differ from your own, are bound to visit it. And also remember—" he looked more sly than ever—"that those who are bored most easily are generally the greatest bores."

Then he found the right road, drew my hand through his arm, and we went home together—good old Common-Sense and I.

XIX.

MYSTERIOUS MESSENGERS.

WHENCE do they come to me, the Mysterious Messengers of the night? Whither do they fly? Are they the only reality in a world of illusion, or a vain illusion in the midst of reality?

I have been a dreamer all my life—literally a dreamer—and the guests of my sleeping hours are closely interwoven in the tangled skein of my fate.

They have painted more beautiful pictures for me than any mortal artist's brush; they have quickened my dull ears to hear music I cannot comprehend, or even enjoy, in wakeful consciousness; they have helped me to travel the wide world over—I who have lived under the same roof and tramped the same narrow streets for twenty years! They have overturned the laws of Gravity—to say nothing of Experience—by teaching me to fly in the skies without wings, and fall to the earth without injury. They annihilate time and space.

Of old I accepted the Mysterious Messengers without surprise or question, as a child accepts the sunshine, the stars, the gift of love. Lately I tried to discover their origin and meaning.

A library of books came fluttering round me, like a flock of distracted birds, rustling their wings—or pages—theorizing, disputing, agreeing, asserting, proving, and disproving a world of facts and fancies.

The Mysterious Messengers were accused of clouding my memory and deadening my senses. I was told that they robbed me of my reasoning faculty.

Many volumes gave me instruction in dream psychology. Occult students taught me to know the meaning of the part played in dreams by my etheric double, my astral body, and my ego. I heard much of the sub-conscious mind. I tried to "dream true," under the guidance of the dear Brushwood Boy and the yet more dear Peter Ibbetson.

To me, the Mysterious Messengers remain a mystery.

They summon dainty fancies, soundless laughter, painless tears, to my quiet pillow. The walls of my room are gone at their magic touch, the night is changed to noon, my spirit wanders away and away.

The Mysterious Messengers bring my friends to greet me, not only from far lands beyond the sea, but from the grave itself, from the unknown world that we all must seek.

It is a starry night. Come out with me under the clear sky! Dreams are rushing through the air, but we shall not see the Mysterious Messengers who send them forth.

Let us stand within the shadow of this old archway, itself the realization of a great builder's dream.

Odd, gruesome nightmares creep, like deadly serpents, along the ground. Light fantasies flutter past.

Do you hear the haunting refrain of a long-forgotten melody? It will echo in the sleeping ear of one who loved it well. Do you see a sheaf of lilies? It will lie upon the aching heart of a soldier's wife, its sweet scent recalling her wedding-day.

Do you see the troop of little phantom children? They are bound for desolate homes.

There is an ever-changing mirage of dear familiar scenes—a long stretch of desert, a mountain peak, a country garden, a little house in a mean street—they are all the visions of blessed sleep.

The sea rolls into the world of dreams.

Far from the caves of memory, far from the land of lost desires, far from the twilight of the Past, far from the dawn of the Future, we see the dreams of the soul come forth.

Where are the Messengers of Mystery? Where are the Lords of the Night? We hear their voices in the sighing wind. We see the light of their eyes for a magic minute as we awaken.

Perhaps we have looked upon their faces—perhaps we have known them well—in the lovely dreams that we cannot remember.

XX.

THE LINGERING GUEST.

BOLT and lock the doors! Bar the casement!
The long day that I call my Life is drawing to a close.
The house must be guarded to-night, for a Guest approaches I cannot welcome. I will not let him in.

He has lingered long in the twilight, dreaded but unseen. If he comes he will never leave me again. All the world will see him at my side. My friends will whisper and point him out. I shall feel the cruel oppression of his presence, day and night.

So I sit by my solitary hearth, as the evening of my Life draws near. The pictures in the fire show me the guests and the scenes of old.

There is Childhood, with its quick fancies, intensity, innocence, passion, pain, rapture. Youth is seen in a haze of bewildering emotion. Maturity is spent in the companionship of my best friends—Humour and Imagination; Middle-Age passes in fitful excitement of farewell to emotion, new interests, unlike the old, a growing affection for solitude.

As I raise my eyes from the shifting pictures, in the falling apart of a smouldering log, I see a shadowy form in the chair that faces me. It gains substance as I look at it—grows and develops into my own double, but dimly seen as in the mirror of a dark room.

I forget the Guest who is barred without. I am absorbed in studying my other self. Is my hair as white, my brow as furrowed, my hands as thin? I look into eyes more deep, untroubled than mine have ever been, eyes that tell of wide experience.

The interest and surprise that I feel in this illusion—spectre—is shown in her face too. We gaze at each other long.

I slowly realize that the bolts and bars have been ineffectual.

This is Old Age—as I myself have formed it. It is but the mirror of myself, stealing in upon me unawares.

The shock is over. We sit beside the fire together, well content. Already we seem to be familiar comrades.

Old Age talks to me very pleasantly of old times, in a voice that recalls, in its soft modulation, the voices long silent, half forgotten in the passing of years.

Memory grows clearer, but not more bright, as the mellow hours of a Summer afternoon are different from the splendour of morning.

Many a bygone friend, in a guise I used to know, comes to sit between us. I think of old triumphs, old losses, old delights. I read old books, and listen to good old songs.

My lingering Guest is very patient. Slowly, slowly, as we pass our days together, I am drawn to thoughts of the Future. I have time to think of the Future now. There is all to-day and all to-morrow! Perhaps there is a whole year—two or three years before me. Perhaps I shall live to see the blue-bells in flower again, and yet again.

“Twilight and evening bell,
And after that the dark!
And may there be no sadness of farewell,
When I embark.”

My boat has drifted into tranquil waters. A sea of troubles is left behind. I have passed the dangerous rapids of Passion and Ambition; I have steered my course through Errors and Disbelief.

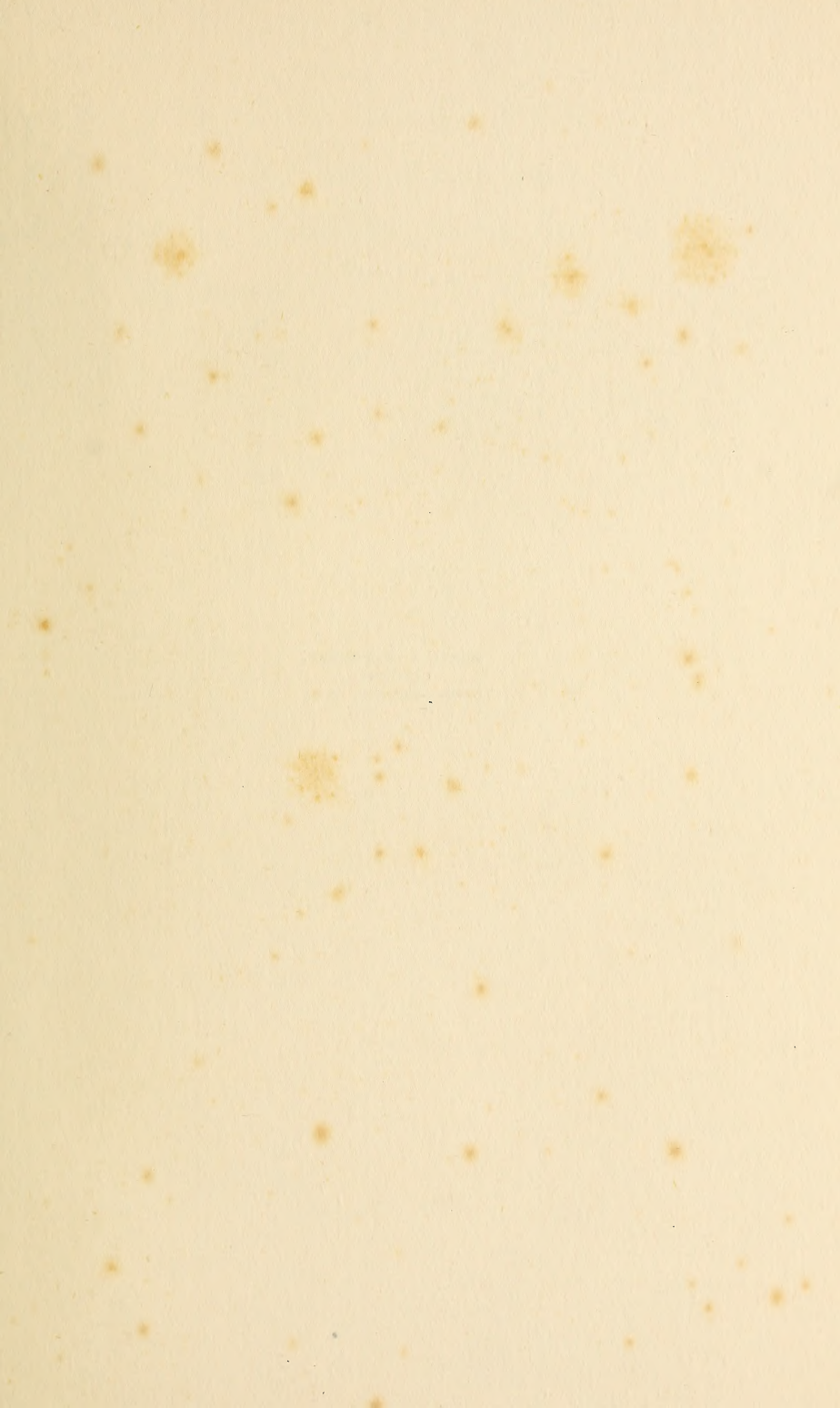
The fire is sinking to white ashes. My companion is very silent.

I wait for the mystic hour when Old Age will lead me to the closed door of this last home, open it wide, and set me free.

Shall I cross the threshold into silence and peaceful darkness?

Shall I see before me—God only knows!—the vision of a new world, as fair as the dawn that follows night, and veiled in the glory that is reflected in the clouds of the setting sun?

THE END.



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